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Chapter IV

BIRTH, CHILDHOOD, PUBERTY

For the Kols there are certain very obvious turning points of life, and at such times Kols believe that evil is present, ready to render the outcome of events unfavourable. To Kols the anxiety is not merely one born of a physical crisis but goes deeper into their consciousness, for at such times favourable supernatural aid must be secured or the evil spirits will triumph over them. Hence at these turning points there are certain rites and ceremonies which must be observed and recourse should not be had to some newer unknown and untried method. Kols are unable to give a rational account of why they perform these rites; as far as they are concerned it is just the custom. Though in many cases the customs may have been adopted from Hinduism, it was so long ago that Kols are now altogether unconscious of it. It should be remembered, therefore, that many of the things described in this connection will also be found true of the village folk all over this part of Central India. An attempt has been made by long and patient enquiry to find out what the Kols themselves do on these important occasions, but we have not sought to compare them with other groups in this regard.

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Birth Customs. *Pregnancy.* The pregnant mother is not considered unclean and there are no particular taboos placed upon her. She is allowed to go about her regular work and do all cooking and household duties without restriction. She may eat what she likes and there are no foods which she must avoid other than those a Kol never uses. She should be careful, however, not to go near places where *bhuts* and other evil spirits are known to lurk, they might attack her and as a result cause a miscarriage. When the woman comes to know that she is pregnant the matter is taken to the family goddess—*devi*—who is usually resident in one corner of the house and she is promised that she will receive an offering if she protects the mother and the unborn babe for the full time of pregnancy. After delivery, or often shortly before if all has gone well, the family will present to the *devi* the particular things that they had promised her. This may be an animal such as a goat, pig or chicken, or just a cocoanut. Again, the simple *hom* offering or fire sacrifice is common. This consists of an oblation of clarified butter (*ghi*) placed in the fire burning before the *devi*, the anointing of the wall with vermilion (*sendur*) and the

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twelve rupees, payable in two equal instalments. Two *saris* are often presented at this time—one for the girl and another for her mother. The washing of the feet and the payment of the bride price are definite expressions of the acceptance of the proposal. Nevertheless, the engagement thus sealed may be broken if either party is dissatisfied. If the girl's side breaks the engagement they must return the bride price and the presents. If the boy's side breaks it they are not entitled to any refund and the money may be kept by the girl's family.

(*b*) *Betrothal and Lagan.* The *lagan* is a letter given by the bride's father to the bridegroom's father, appointing the day of the marriage and ceremonies connected therewith and thus providing an outline for this part of the wedding cycle. The *lagan* should be prepared by the *pandit* of the girl's village or one selected by her family. When the time is ripe for the boy and girl to be formally married the Brahmin priest is called to the house or is informed of the proposal and is asked to write up the *lagan*. The *lagan* should have the complete programme for the *sadi* worked out after consulting horoscopes and taking into account auspicious or inauspicious seasons and circumstances. The best days for weddings are, in order, Monday, Saturday, Thursday and Tuesday, and the *lagan* will take this into account. The luckiest months are *Chaita* (March-April), *Magh* (January-February) and *Phagun* (February-March). After the *lagan* is written the paper is sprinkled with *haldi* water. Here is an actual example of a Kol *lagan* :

SHRI

Shri—may god Ganesh help us. Hari the lord was worshipped with *gur* (raw sugar) and *sendur* (vermilion). The son of Sail named Matukdhari has been selected as the bridegroom. May the lord make the marriage time auspicious.

On Wednesday, the sixth day of the bright fortnight of Magh, the marriage bower will be constructed; on Thursday, the seventh day, the anointing ceremony will take place; on Friday, the eighth, the bridegroom's marriage party will come and on Saturday, the ninth, the circumambulation of the marriage post will take place.

Written by Radha kunji
on the second day of the bright fortnight of Magh.
May all be auspicious!

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778 411 [785 787] are very common. The trident with the sharp point is used at the time the *panda* or another is possessed of Khermai, and is pierced through the tongue or cheek.

3. *Spiked Sandals* (*Kharau*). Every well-equipped shrine should 778 787 have at least one pair of spiked sandals. These are made of pieces of wood in the shape of the sole of a shoe with sharp spikes driven through so that the person walking on them stands on the points. There is a 292 wooden peg toward the front of each which fits between the big toe and the next and holds the sandal on the foot. These are generally used at the time of the trance. When the spirit of Kalimai possesses a man, it will be evidenced by his desire to put on these sandals and jump about in them.

4. *Iron Tongs* (*Chimta*). There is also another kind of iron 778 785 instrument found in these shrines: iron tongs used for taking coals out of the fire. When Sannyasi *deo* comes upon a man he will take 787 the tongs and beat himself with them. Hindu ascetics usually carry [412] tongs.

5. *Iron Lash* (*Gurda*). This is a sort of magic chain made of iron links barbed with bits of steel. The handle by which it is grasped is also iron. During the *bawa*, if one is possessed (particularly by Bhuiyan *deo*), he will pick up this chain and lash himself till the blood comes. If some person, possessed of an evil spirit, is brought before the shrine, and the *panda* in his trance recognizes the reality of the spirit possession, he will attempt to cast out the spirit by lashing the unfortunate man.

6. *Iron Nails*. Some bits of iron or iron nails are usually found somewhere about the shrine. These serve a dual purpose: they are tests for Khermai, and one possessed of her can stick them into his flesh without pain or discomfort. They are also used to frighten away evil spirits who may make a disturbance, and are sometimes flung in their direction causing them to fly away.

7. *A Bed of Spikes* (*Palna*). Often a bed of spikes is found in connection with these shrines. This too is to test spirit possession. 778 One possessed of Kali will seek to use the bed of spikes.

● [777 237] 8. *A Ram's Horn* is sometimes found. It is lucky to have one and it protects the shrine.

9. *Clay Lamps* (*Dip*). Clay dishes into which oil is poured and [354] wicks attached are also found at all shrines. Sweet oil and incense are mixed, and during the time of worship two or three of these are lighted and kept burning. The *panda* lights and cares for them.

10. *Ashes* (*Rakha*). A pile of ashes is always found somewhere [789] about the shrine. This is a good protective device against evil spirits.

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even death are often traced to this influence. A woman is more likely 754
to have an evil eye than a man. Kols believe that Gond women
should be avoided as far as possible for many of them are said to have [648]
an evil eye that is likely to affect children. A well-dressed person is
more likely to be affected than a poorly dressed one, and to put on fine [292]
clothes is to attract attention and therefore invite danger.

The evil eye may also be directed against animals and plants; 754
so a bad crop, or the illness or death of an animal, may be due to some 789
one with an evil eye. Pumpkins are often trained to grow upon the 824
roof of Kol houses and may be protected from the evil eye by white-
washing an ordinary flat tile, making a cross in the centre with lamp- [241]
black, and putting upon the tile as many dots as there are pumpkins
growing upon the roof. This will protect them and no pumpkin will
rot. A rotted pumpkin is the sure sign of the activity of this mysterious
force.

The time of eating is a particularly dangerous one from the point 754
of view of the evil eye. No stranger should come into the presence 264
of one who is taking his meal, and at that time he should turn his
back on all people, including even the members of his own household. [609]
If one possessed of the evil eye should see the face of a person taking
his food it may have a serious result. Therefore it is wise never to
interrupt a man at his meals; this a stranger will never do. If
accidentally confronted in this way, the eater should stop his meal and
wait till the person has passed out of sight. To be seen in the act of [291]
putting on new clothes is also to expose oneself to the dangers of the
evil eye, should such a person happen by.

WHAT THESE FORCES DO. We have seen something of the 776
supernormal powers which the average Kol feels are all about him. 754
What do these powers bring to pass? Some indication of this has
been given already, but more may be stated. Diseases, particularly
wasting diseases, are surely due to the presence of evil spirits or the
spell of the evil eye. Any mysterious disease may be ascribed to [777]
these powers. Ill luck is also due to the attention of the forces named
above. A man may be tripped up: it is the work of a spirit; he
cuts his hand: a *bhut* directed the axe. We were told of a certain
evil spirit dwelling in a banyan tree on the Great Deccan Road near 776
Katni. He was particularly annoyed by cyclists: probably he could 754
not get used to the march of civilization. This spirit was especially 493
active at midday and midnight, and if a cyclist should fail to show
respect, by not dismounting and walking by the tree at those parti-
cular hours, he was sure to be killed. It was commonly reported

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In a "yellow skin disease", probably a form of jaundice, the following procedure may be pursued: One should take some *til* oil and pour it into a brass *lota*. A sickle or knife is waved over this to frighten off any influences which might affect the magical powers resulting from the act to be performed. When it is believed that all the spirits have passed from the region of the cup, the sick man is asked to gaze into the oil and catch his reflection. If he can do this, the disease enters the oil in the cup and may be thrown out, no longer to work harm on the person concerned.

LUCK AND OMENS. There are auspicious and inauspicious days to be observed and taken into account. In the Hindu month there are five unlucky days which, however, vary from month to month; and the Kol, if he cares to, can find these out by consulting a *pandit*. Nothing new should be started on those days, nor a journey begun, nor any wedding preparations undertaken. Some days of the week are more auspicious than others. Kols believe the best days to be, in the order of their merit; Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. Tuesday, Friday and Sunday are the least desirable, but these days are not really bad, it is usually added, but just inauspicious. On Sunday, for example, discussions should be avoided, as such are likely to become heated and quarrels ensue.

Omens should be taken into account, particularly when any new work is being started, as well as during the marriage preparations and at the beginning of a journey. Often a Kol sets forth on a trip to town and returns home not long after he has started. He probably came across some inauspicious happenings, and if the trip should be of a doubtful nature, and he does not quite understand its significance, he will be on the lookout for all kinds of omens. Kols have often promised to come to our stopping places and discuss matters with us, but they have failed to show up. The reason probably lay in the fact that they could not quite figure out why we wanted them, even though we thought we made it clear, and as they started out some omens presented themselves—omens which they probably would never have noted on ordinary occasions, and so they remained at home.

Among good omens the following may be named:

Passing four people seated together.
Meeting a Brahmin just as one starts out.
Passing a vessel filled with water or grain.
Observing a burning lamp by the wayside.
Seeing a woman carrying a healthy male child.

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one's bodyguard. On the whole the dogs of an Indian village are a miserable lot and are a menace to the health of the people.

The tiger is another animal reverenced by Indian peasants and is very prominent in their folk belief, especially in areas where tigers roam. This is also shared by the Kols and as a jungle people they reverence him. A Kol should never take part in a beat to track down a tiger. If one should be met in the forest he should be addressed very respectfully. Certain parts of the tiger are useful as powerful charms. The whiskers, teeth and claws are prophylactics against the evil eye. To eat his flesh, particularly his heart, gives one the disposition of a tiger. To see a dead tiger is bad luck as his spirit may later harm the person observing him. If worshipped as Baghdeo[1] the tiger will not injure any one he meets in the forest nor molest the cattle. There is a story current among the Kols that in the distant past a tiger was born out of a Kol. During the years that followed they lived together peacefully in the forest, but after a time the tiger began to trouble Kols so that a separation was deemed advisable and since that time they have lived apart.[2]

The serpent is both feared and reverenced by Kols. It is usually the cobra which is adored, although Kols treat all serpents with respect. However, it is considered no great sin to slay a cobra, but it must not be done unless the cobra is stubborn and shows fight, particularly when in the house. If a cobra, or any other snake is found in a dwelling house it is addressed respectfully as *maharaj* and asked politely to leave. It may be helped out with a little judicious poking with a stick. If it goes out readily it is helped on its way and if all goes well is not molested further. If, however, the *nag* shows fight and does not appear willing to leave the house or courtyard it may be beaten and killed and its body burned. An offering should be made to its spirit after such an occasion. At the time of the festival of Nagpanchami[3] milk is set out for snakes, a common practice all over Central India.

The horse is an animal with which Rautiya Kols do not have much to do; as a rule they will not touch one, and its dung is absolutely taboo. Some of their traditions concerning horses are recorded on previous pages.[4]

The sacrificial animals are the chicken, goat, pig and sheep.

We could not find out much concerning the Kol idea of birds.

1 See pages 141-142.
2 See pages 41-42.
3 See pages 171-172.
4 See pages 34-35; also Chapter X.